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More security will be difficult, expensive

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In the aftermath of America's recent spy scandals, security officials have gotten a glimpse of what real improvements in secret-keeping are going to be: difficult, expensive, intrusive and controversial.

Nowhere is this more evident than at the Defense Department, which is the undisputed champion in volume generation of secrets. The department has just chalked up a success in the security business, a 16 percent cut in the number of people holding security clearances. The new, reduced grand total? Fully 3.5 million.

The Pentagon is moving on to tighten security for these multitudes still holding clearances, including implementation of the recommendations of its Security Review Commission headed by Richard G. Stillwell, a retired Army general.

And even at that, there are home-grown spies in America's future — take it from L. Britt Snider, the department's director of counterintelligence and security policy. "I don't think there's any way to prevent a person when he absolutely decides he's going to do it," Mr. Snider said.

But Mr. Snider and others are trying to make spying harder. It's slow going, and expensive. For instance, the Pentagon figures that one relatively minor Stillwell commission recommendation — to expand background checks on candidates for a secret-level clearance — will cost it $14 million this year. That's for nickel-and-dime, maybe 25-cent, secrets. Congress this year anted up an additional $25 million just to make a start on cutting the enormous backlog of reinvestigations of those holding the more serious, top secret clearance. Investigators had been doing 33,000 or so a year. The department would like to do 150,000 next fiscal year.

Those actions represent more of the same kind of security measures that existed while the recently disclosed spying was going on, including a Navy ring that operated in one form or another for nearly 20 years. So the question becomes, how to make it better?

One of the themes of the Stillwell commission might be called "still more of the same." The commission targeted access to codes as one special area of concern: Break the code and all sorts of secrets are exposed. It told the Pentagon to reinstate, albeit more selectively this time, a special access program for those involved with codes that had been abandoned in 1975 as too burdensome.

Other targets for added security emphasis are what Mr. Snider calls people on the "nuts and bolts level" who operate sensitive intelligence-collection systems and work at key communications posts. Ronald W. Pelton, a former communications specialist with the National Security Agency, was convicted of compromising collection systems to the Soviet Union. The Navy ring, run by John A. Walker Jr., traded in communications secrets of that service.

The commission also urged greater use of polygraph tests in counterintelligence work. Congress, which keeps a close rein on use of the controversial "lie detector," authorized 3,500 counterintelligence tests this fiscal year and 7,000 next year. The Pentagon wants about 10,000 tests a year for those holding special-access clearances above top secret. There are about 150,000 such clearances within the Defense Department, excluding the National Security Agency, the huge, supersecret electronic eavesdropping agency.

A polygraph test reportedly prompted the departure of Edward L. Howard from the CIA, but not until he had been trained and given sensitive information about U.S. intelligence operations against Moscow. He is being sought for allegedly selling secrets to the Soviet Union after escaping from under FBI surveillance.

Innovation and qualitative improvements in security, as opposed to quantitative improvements, are harder to come by. "Security officials can always dream up endless numbers of things to 'improve security,' but they would be totally unacceptable for any number of reasons," said Mr. Snider.

Subjecting everyone with a clearance to a polygraph test and searching briefcases and purses of everyone leaving the Pentagon fall in that category, according to the counterintelligence chief, as would a system of tracking all of the estimated 19 million classified documents.

At the same time, though, the Pentagon has done little to improve its ability to keep track of those mountains of secrets. "In information security, in terms of document control or making sure things don't leave buildings or aren't given to unauthorized persons, we are pretty much in the dark ages," Mr. Snider acknowledged.

The Defense Department is only now exploring such things as sophisticated document coding for reading by electronic scanners, which are themselves the higher-tech successors to the bar code readers in the supermarket.

The department also is taking preliminary steps toward bringing together what its various security organs do know. At the urging of the Stillwell commission, the functions of the Defense Security Institute in Richmond, Va., are being greatly expanded. Formerly a training center for government and government contractor security officers, the institute now will act as a clearinghouse for research into security issues and will make sure everyone knows the results.

But even if all security know-how is centralized, all documents accounted for, clearances cut to the bone and investigations stepped up, there will still be millions of people with clearances, and perhaps hundreds of thousands with access to one really sensitive program or another.

How can the nation's secret-keepers do a better job of keeping the secrets those

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millions carry home in their heads every night? No one seems quite sure. The field is called "personnel security," and while it has not lacked for attention, it has hasn't had much serious study.

"I ask myself the question every day. Why hasn't there been research? No good answer comes to mind," said Richard S. Elster, director of the new Defense Personnel Security Research and Education Center in Monterey, Calif. "When I talk to other people about research in personnel security, I get sort of a supercilious response from some. I guess there's a feeling it's sort of a tawdry enterprise. I think, in fact, that it's a vital national concern."

"The common-sense approach is that, if you're a diamond merchant, if an individual has been doing bizarre or illegal things in the past, you're not going to hire that individual to be your diamond courier," he said. One key issue for research is what level of untoward behavior constitutes a reasonable basis for denial of a clearance.

The center also will study such basic elements of the security screening process as the background investigation. "It may sound prosaic, but a lot more needs to be known about how to interview people," the new director said.

The touchiest thing the center is likely to look into is the polite-sounding "continuing evaluation." Mr. Elster asked, "Given a person with a security clearance, how do we monitor — I know that sounds Orwellian — how do we monitor how they're doing?"

If financial health is a factor that should be monitored (Pelton's approach to the Soviet Embassy in Washington followed his declaration of bankruptcy), should a clearance-holder give permission for inspection of his tax records? How should peers, family and neighbors be approached? And how is it to be done lawfully and constitutionally? "It's an area in which I want to move very carefully," said Mr. Elster.

It's unlikely that the research will come up with a profile of a likely spy. Despite the seeming avalanche of recent cases, a "caught spy" is statistically a rare bird. "I've got to keep an open mind but I'm not terribly optimistic about having a profile," he said.

The center will look broadly at security issues, from carelessness with documents to aggressive sale of secrets.

"Although we'll never know, the results ought to lead to fewer spies," Mr. Elster said.